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VATICAN DECISION DRAWS COOL RESPONSE

NEW YORK -- Episcopal Church reaction to the announcement that the Roman Catholic Church will receive a limited number of former Episcopalians -- including married former priests -- has been generally cool, but the reaction of ecumenical specialists has been a bit more critical.

The decision, announced in late August by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, provides for "common identity" for Anglicans who would be absorbed into the Roman Catholic structures but allowed to retain some forms of Anglican piety. Oaths of loyalty would be required and, most believe, the former Episcopal priests would have to undergo a form of reordination.

The move caught many Church officials unawares and, in spite of a flurry of early publicity, Church reaction was muted.

Presiding Bishop John M. Allin set the pace by declining any comment until he and other leaders had had a chance to study and reflect on the move. When he did comment -- early in September in a letter to the Church's bishops -- the primate made it clear that he felt the greatest effects would be on the Roman Catholic Church.

"We know that the rule of celibacy now mandatory for most Roman clergy is one under which many of those clergy are living with some reluctance," he said. "It will be hard for those men to accept the fact that a new arrival from Anglicanism will be able to serve as a priest while married while a life-long Roman Catholic will not. This will be hard experience for the Roman Catholics and they should have our charity and good will as they seek to struggle with it."

Bishop Allin went on to affirm that "our on-going ecumenical conversations with the Roman Catholic Church should continue at all levels. The Vatican decision might be considered, of course, in these conversations but our goal of unity remains one toward which we should all strive."

Bishop Allin's thoughts were echoed by the Rt. Rev. Arthur A. Vogel of West Missouri. Bishop Vogel, co-chairman of the Anglican Roman Catholic dialogue in the U.S. and the Episcopal Church delegate to the international talks, was in London en route to Rome when he learned of the action. Conceding that it "was a bit of a bombshell," Bishop Vogel commented that "The more I hear about it the better I feel about the situation."

Others were less optimistic. Bishop Robert Rusack, whose Los Angeles diocese is one of the centers of the dissident group that sought unity with the Roman Catholics, commented: "I hope it can help Christian unity, but at this point I don't see that it would strengthen Anglican-Roman Catholic relationships. If re-ordination were required that might be a setback."

However, in ecumenical circles, the mood was gloomier. One Roman Catholic ecumenist warned the Episcopal Church Center staff of the move and expressed chagrin that it was taken on such short notice.


Contacted at the World Council of Churches meeting in Geneva, Cynthia Wedel, an Episcopal ecumenical pioneer and a president of the world body, noted: "There's no question but that it will have a damaging effect." She characterized the decision as "kind of contrary to the really good relationships we have had."

Many observers, noting that the move toward unity came from groups unwilling to accept changes in the Episcopal Church, expressed surprise at the Vatican decision and wondered if the full consequences had been thought out, often adding the question: "Would they (the former Episcopalians) be able to accept change in the Roman Catholic Church?"

With the passage of time, the effects of the decision seem to many experts to be quite narrow. In the only official statement from the rest of the Anglican Communion, Bishop John Howe, secretary-general of the Anglican Consultative Council, put forth just such an interpretation.

"Although the Vatican has decided that celibacy is not necessary for those former Episcopal clergy who seek to become Roman Catholic priests and are already married, no change is authorised with regard to Anglican Orders and each case will be reviewed individually by the Vatican itself," the bishop asserted.

His statement continued: "In conjunction with the Vatican and subject to its approval, the U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference has been authorised to work out the most appropriate form of integration into the Roman Catholic Church. The possibility of some continuing Anglican usage for former Anglicans is not absolutely ruled out where this seems necessary for pastoral reasons.



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"But whether or not former Episcopal priests seek membership of the Roman Catholic Church as individuals or groups, a personal profession of faith and reception will still be required.

"Assurance has been given that whatever pastoral solution is eventually evolved, it will be pursued with ecumenical respect and sensitivity for the Episcopal Church, U.S.A., and without prejudice to the visible unity sought between the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches of the Anglican Communion."

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